

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
October 23, 2003

VENTURA RIVER *ARUNDO* REMOVAL DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

File No. 03-127
Project Manager: Karen Bane

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$132,000 to the Ventura Resource Conservation District to implement a portion of the Ventura River *Arundo* Removal Demonstration Project.

LOCATION: Casitas Springs reach of the Ventura River, Ventura County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Resource Enhancement

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: Project Maps
 - Exhibit 2: Final EIR including Mitigation Monitoring Program
 - Exhibit 3: Resolution and Statement of Overriding Considerations and Notice of Determination
 - Exhibit 4: Letters of Support
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31257 - 31270 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thirty-two thousand dollars (\$132,000) to the Ventura Resource Conservation District (RCD) to implement the Ventura River *Arundo* Removal Demonstration Project, except for the revegetation experiment, subject to the condition that, prior to the disbursement of any funds, the RCD shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, including scope of work, budget and schedule, and the names of any contractors it intends to use to implement the project. The State Coastal Conservancy also adopts the Mitigation Monitoring Program (MMP) for the Ventura River *Arundo* Removal Demonstration Project, attached as Appendix B to the Final Environmental Impact Report adopted by the Ventura County Watershed Protection District on September 9, 2003. The RCD shall carry out the project in accordance with requirements of the MMP and shall provide the Conservancy with copies of all monitoring documentation relating to portions of the project that are funded by this grant.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 6 of the Public Resources Code (31251-31270) regarding enhancement of coastal resources.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the information contained in the EIR adopted by the Ventura County Watershed Protection District (VCWPD) on September 9, 2003 (attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 2), and finds that, with one exception treated immediately below, there is no substantial evidence that the activities to be funded by the Conservancy, as changed or mitigated, will have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382.
4. The Conservancy concurs with the VCWPD’s finding that the project will have one significant and unavoidable adverse effect with respect to noise. During the first project year, noise associated with cutting and chipping of *Arundo* would exceed the County’s adopted significance criteria for construction-related noise in residential areas. Nevertheless, the Conservancy concurs with the VCWPD that the proposed project would result in beneficial effects that outweigh the unavoidable adverse impact on noise. These beneficial effects include improving the composition and diversity of native plant communities in the river system, decreasing flood and fire hazards associated with *Arundo*, increasing recreational uses of the watershed and improving visual resources (as discussed in the EIR and this staff recommendation). As the VCWPD finds, even with noise mitigation measures including restricted hours of operation, engine covers and properly operating mufflers, there is no feasible way to lessen or avoid the identified impacts of noise in residential areas; Alternative 1 would result in the same unavoidable significant impact; and Alternatives 2 and 3 would result in additional unavoidable significant impacts.
5. There is no evidence before the Conservancy that the Ventura River *Arundo* Removal Demonstration Project will have a potentially adverse effect, either individually or cumulatively, on wildlife resources as defined under California Fish and Game Code Section 711.2.
6. The Conservancy has on the basis of substantial evidence rebutted the presumption of adverse effect contained in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 753.5(d) regarding the potential for adverse effect on wildlife resources as defined under California Fish and Game Code Section 711.2.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff is recommending that the Conservancy provide a grant of \$132,000 to the Ventura Resource Conservation District (RCD) to implement the Ventura River *Arundo* Removal Demonstration Project. The proposed demonstration is a Tier 2 project on the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project Work Plan. The Ventura River drains to the Pacific Ocean through the Ventura Estuary and is home to threatened, endangered, and special interest species that are at risk because of *Arundo donax* (giant cane). *Arundo donax* has degraded portions of the riverine

and riparian habitat of the Ventura River and created a fire and flood hazard. Eradication of *Arundo* is necessary to maintain and enhance the health of the watershed as well as the southern California steelhead population.

The Ventura County *Arundo* Task Force, which is chaired by the RCD, developed the proposed project to galvanize support for a strategic and coordinated program to eradicate *Arundo donax* from the entire Ventura River watershed. Although the removal of *Arundo*, and the use of herbicides to do so, is readily accepted in other parts of southern California, Ventura County residents are still skeptical about the necessity of herbicides and in some cases unwilling to have *Arundo* removed from their properties regardless of the herbicide issue. A science-based demonstration project is essential to gain wide public acceptance of the need to remove *Arundo* and of the methods for environmentally sound and cost-effective removal. Hence, the demonstration project site was purposefully located in a highly visible and accessible location to increase the public awareness achieved by the project. Additionally, the data generated by the demonstration project would allow for effective planning and implementation of future giant cane removal projects within the watershed, and, ultimately, throughout other watersheds within Ventura County.

The proposed project is a five-year program that includes *Arundo* removal, native plant revegetation, monitoring of treatment effectiveness and revegetation success, and public outreach. The demonstration site would be separated into four areas and four different types of removal methods would be implemented to evaluate their effectiveness. The four removal methods are 1) foliar application of a herbicide and mechanical removal after the stalks are dead; 2) cutting the *Arundo* to its root mass and subsequently painting a herbicide on the cut stalks; 3) cutting the giant cane to its root mass and using foliar spray applications on resprouts; and 4) mechanical removal, including excavation of the root mass. Subsequent herbicide treatments on resprouts would be closely documented to determine the rate at which resprouts occur within each removal section. Public outreach materials and activities would include brochures, a traveling exhibit, presentations, and tours.

The Ventura County *Arundo* Task Force is a consortium of federal, state, and local agencies, publicly elected officials, and public and private interest groups. The lead agency is the Ventura County Resource Conservation District, which has previously received grants from the Conservancy for work in Calleguas Creek. The Ventura County Watershed Protection District acted as the lead agency for the environmental documentation and will oversee mitigation and monitoring of project impacts as provided in the EIR. Both the RCD and VCWPD have conducted *Arundo* removal on a small scale as part of previous restoration projects and routine maintenance of flood control infrastructure.

Site Description: The demonstration site is located adjacent to the flood control levee within the Ventura River near the community of Casitas Springs. The site is approximately 4,500 feet long and 50 feet wide. Public access is provided by a pedestrian trail located along the levee, as well as access points and easements provided by the VCWPD. A community center and parking lot are also located within walking distance. The riverbed within the reach of the project is paved with large cobble. The demonstration footprint has a medium density stand of *Arundo* punctuated with a few mature willow trees.

Project History: The Ventura County *Arundo* Task Force (ATF) was formed to address issues associated with reducing or eliminating *Arundo*. Ultimately, the goal of the ATF is to reduce or eliminate *Arundo* throughout the entire Ventura River watershed, as well as other watersheds

within the county. The ATF intends to coordinate future *Arundo* removal projects and provide technical and monetary assistance. Soon after its formation, the ATF identified the need for an easily accessible and highly visible demonstration project to educate residents who are skeptical about the need to use herbicides and reluctant to have *Arundo* removed from their properties. Members of the ATF have provided property and funds for the proposed project and it was placed on the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project Work Plan.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$132,000
Natural Resource Conservation Service	67,000
California Department of Fish and Game	63,500
Ventura County Watershed Protection District	<u>63,500</u>
Total Project Cost	\$326,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is an appropriation to the Conservancy from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 50). Consistent with the purposes of this funding source, the proposed project would be carried out in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy's enabling legislation and would involve the protection and enhancement of critical coastal watersheds.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Implementation of the Ventura River *Arundo* Demonstration Project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resource Code Sections 31251-31270. Pursuant to §31251, the Conservancy may award grants to public agencies to enhance coastal resources which have suffered loss of natural values because of natural or human-induced events. Consistent with that section, the proposed project would help the Ventura *Arundo* Task Force, chaired by the Ventura RCD, prepare for an *Arundo* Removal Program in the entire Ventura River watershed, including drainages behind the Matilija Dam. A demonstration and public outreach project is the necessary first step to eliminate disagreement among stakeholders over removal methods and to galvanize landowner willingness to allow the work on their property.

Section 31251.2(a) allows the Conservancy to award a grant for work that occurs partly outside the coastal zone, "[i]n order to enhance the natural or scenic character of coastal resources within the coastal zone". The proposed project is appropriate under §31251.2(a), since it is the necessary first step to enable a larger program that will serve to remove the non-native vegetation from the entire riparian corridor, including the coastal zone portion. Unless removed, *Arundo* will continue to infest and expand in the coastal zone portion of the river thereby degrading existing habitat for wildlife and scenic viewing and increasing the flood and fire hazard. The location of the demonstration project was selected for the ease of public access in order to educate landowners and environmentalists from the entire watershed.

Section 31252 of the Public Resources Code requires that all areas proposed for enhancement be identified in local plans as requiring public action to resolve existing or potential resource protection problems. The proposed project is responsive to policies calling for public action in the City of Buenaventura's Local Coastal Program as described in the "Consistency with Local Coastal

Program Policies” section below. The VCWPD is currently working on a feasibility study to remove the Matilija Dam from the Ventura River watershed.

Consistent with §31253, the amount of proposed Conservancy funding for this project was determined by the total amount of funding available for coastal resource enhancement projects, the fiscal resources of project partners and the urgency of the project relative to other eligible coastal resource enhancement projects. Without funding from the Coastal Conservancy the proposed *Arundo* removal demonstration project will be delayed as will the subsequent removal program for the entire Ventura River watershed.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective C** of the Conservancy’s Strategic Plan, the proposed project would eradicate *Arundo donax*, a non-native invasive species, from five acres of the Ventura River, foster cooperation from landowners for future eradication work along the river, and develop the capacity of the Ventura *Arundo* Task Force and their contractors to conduct an *Arundo* Removal Program for the entire Ventura River watershed.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy’s statutory programs and purposes:** See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation” section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The proposed demonstration is a Tier 2 project on the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project Work Plan. The proposed project has strong community support. Support letters are attached as Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The Ventura River watershed is a coastal watershed. Since *Arundo* spreads by rhizomes, which have been displaced and distributed by storm flows, it must be removed starting at the top of the watershed. The proposed project, located off Highway 33 adjacent to the levee trail for equestrians and pedestrians, is outside the coastal zone. The project site was selected because of its easy accessibility to the public to view the work over time. This step is necessary to launch the *Arundo* Removal Program, which will progress from the top of the watershed toward the ocean.
5. **Need:** The Ventura *Arundo* Task Force is reluctant to begin the proposed project without securing all the funds necessary to complete it. Conservancy authorization would complement funds contributed by California Department of Fish and Game, Ventura County Watershed Protection District, and Natural Resource Conservation Service, enabling the project to proceed.

6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Ventura River watershed is one of the major coastal watersheds of Ventura County, supports southern California steelhead, and is the focus of considerable study about removing Matilja Dam. An *Arundo* Removal Program is a necessary part of any dam removal proposal and will help restore steelhead habitat. The proposed project will lay the groundwork for such a program.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The City of Buenaventura's Local Coastal Program is embedded in the City's Comprehensive Plan Update to the Year 2010. The following statements in the Resources Element pertain to the proposed project:

- Policy 3.1 calls for a reduction in the need for flood protection improvements and "protection of the natural attributes and wildlife of the Ventura River."
- Objective 12 states that sensitive wetland, riparian, and oak woodland wildlife habitat areas should be protected.
- Policy 13.1 encourages "preservation of the Ventura and Santa Clara Rivers in their present semi-natural state, and possible restoration to natural conditions."

A watershed-wide *Arundo* Removal Program would reduce flood hazards from the buildup of stalks behind bridges and other infrastructure, restore degraded riparian and wetland areas, and protect undisturbed riparian and wetland areas. The proposed project would provide the necessary first step toward this program by educating the residents and landowners whose cooperation will be needed and by building the technical capacity of the ATF and their contractors.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA, Public Resources Code Sections 21000 *et seq.*) requires consideration of potential environmental effects of agency actions and approvals, unless exempt. Accordingly, as lead agency, the Ventura County Watershed Protection Division (VCWPD) prepared, through the consulting firm of Aspen Environmental Group, an Environmental Impact Report (EIR), attached as Exhibit 2, to evaluate the potential environmental consequences associated with implementation of the Ventura River *Arundo* Removal Demonstration Project. The Draft EIR was noticed and circulated for public review on June 16, 2003. The 30-day comment period ended on July 30, 2003. The County responded to comments (EIR Appendix A) and produced the Final EIR in August 2003. During a public hearing on September 9, 2003, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors, acting as the Board of Supervisors for the Ventura County Watershed Protection District, adopted the Final EIR and a CEQA Mitigation Monitoring Program (Exhibit 2) as well as findings of overriding considerations (Exhibit 3). On September 10, 2003, the County filed a CEQA Notice of Determination for the EIR (Exhibit 3).

The Conservancy, a CEQA responsible agency with respect to the project, will provide funds to the Ventura Resource Conservation District for coastal resource enhancement purposes. Specifically, the Conservancy will help fund removal of *Arundo*, monitoring, and public outreach.

The Final EIR identified possible significant effects of the project in the areas of air quality, biological resources, water resources, noise and transportation. For all potentially significant effects, except noise, the proposed mitigation will avoid, reduce, or minimize the possible effect to a level of insignificance. The proposed mitigation is contained in the Mitigation Monitoring Pro-

gram for the Ventura River *Arundo* Removal Demonstration Project (Appendix B to the FEIR, Exhibit 2). The VCWPD is responsible for implementing the Program.

Construction related noise during initial project implementation would exceed Ventura County's adopted significance criteria for construction noise near residential areas. During the first project year, noise associated with cutting and chipping of *Arundo* would exceed the County's adopted significance criteria for construction-related noise in residential areas. Even with mitigations, such as limited hours of equipment operation, engine covers, and properly functioning mufflers, the construction noise cannot be mitigated to a level of less than significant. Nevertheless, the Conservancy concurs with the VCWPD's statement of overriding considerations that the proposed project would result in beneficial effects that outweigh the unavoidable adverse impact on noise. These beneficial effects include improving the composition and diversity of native plant communities in the river system, decreasing flood and fire hazards associated with *Arundo*, increasing recreational uses of the watershed and improving visual resources (as discussed in the EIR and this staff recommendation).

Staff has reviewed the VCWPD's EIR, Mitigation and Monitoring Program, and Statement of Overriding Considerations. Staff believes that, with the exception of the noise effect, the Conservancy-funded portion of the project will not have a significant effect on the environment if the proposed mitigations and Mitigation Monitoring Program are implemented. Staff concurs that the project will have significant beneficial environmental, visual, and recreation effects and will reduce fire and flood hazards, even with the unavoidable noise effect. Further, staff believes that the proposed project advances important objectives consistent with the goals described in Chapter 6 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation regarding coastal resource enhancement.

Conservancy staff recommends that the Conservancy: (1) find that, except for noise, the project, as mitigated, avoids, reduces, or mitigates the possible effects of the Ventura River *Arundo* Removal Demonstration Project to a level of insignificance; (2) adopt a Statement of Overriding Considerations with regard to noise; (3) adopt the Mitigation and Monitoring Program (EIR Appendix B) and require that the RCD comply with the Program and provide copies of all monitoring documentation to the Conservancy, in implementing the project; and (4) find that there is, on the basis of substantial evidence, no evidence before the Conservancy that the project will have a potential adverse effect on wildlife resources as defined under California Fish and Game Code Section 711.2 and 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 753.5(d).

Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Determination for the project.